

# Slow Boat To China

by Mike Blackledge

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My parents were unique individuals. Everyone can say that, however not everyone can say that their parents met on a slow boat to China.

Not a day goes by that I don't wish I had Mom around "For One More Day" as Mitch Albom wrote - some time to talk as adults about her childhood. My mother died when I was 29, my father when I was 40 - and I didn't get into genealogy for another 10 years after that. I have learned many facts about my parents' lives from genealogy research.

My mother **Dorothy Marita Forrant** was born in Salem, MA in 1907. Her father soon abandoned the family and they moved to Ware, MA. In Ware just about everyone worked in the cotton mill. The census records show line after line listing "mill operative" under occupation. My mother hated working in the mill, and after graduating from Ware High School, she worked her way through a nearby Commercial College:



Dorothy (left), Irish Grandmother, brother Arthur, c. 1916

*1926, Northhampton, Mass.- To Whom It May Concern: I am glad to state that Miss Dorothy M. Forrant of Ware, Massachusetts, entered this school in the fall of 1925; earned her way while attending here until she graduated in June, 1926. She maintained high grades in all her commercial studies and was an exceptionally rapid and accurate typist - - one of the best we have turned out for a number of years. (signed) John C. Pickett, Assistant Principal Northhampton Commercial College, Inc.*

My mother's prowess in typing and stenography was a boon to both her and later, to me as a genealogist, as she not only typed all of her letters, she kept a carbon copy. Mother was presented with a typewriter from the College as a prize in the typing contest and all of us kids eventually had to learn how to touch-type on that old Smith-Corona. Mom had capped the keys. Growing up we didn't realize that those were the keys to her finally escaping from the mill at age nineteen via a job with the Federal government:

*1927, Washington, D.C. - TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: Miss Dorothy M. Farrant has been employed in the Department of State under my supervision since September 20, 1926. Miss Farrant is a very capable stenographer and typist, energetic, willing and conscientious in the discharge of any duties which may be assigned to her. (signed) E.B. Russ*

This recommendation helped earn her way into a plum six-month assignment as she excitedly wrote to her Mother and her brother Arthur:

*Jan. 3, 1928, Washington, D.C. - Miss Dorothy M. Farrant. Madam: You are hereby appointed a Stenographer to the Sixth International Conference of American States to be held at Habana, Cuba, January 16, 1928. (signed) Frank B. Kellog*

*Jan. 1928, Havana, Cuba - Care of the Delegation of the United States, Hotel Sevilla-Biltmore, Room 105 -*

*Dearest Mother: Well, I have arrived at last. I had a wonderful journey on the boat and was seasick a little but not much. The Hotel we are staying at is the most expensive in the city. Even my room is \$10. a day without meals. Hot Dog! What does Arthur think of it? I have a private room with a private bath and a telephone and everything...*

*The President of the United States is coming to Habana Monday and the President of Cuba has proclaimed a legal holiday in his honor.*

*Did I tell you the girls gave me a surprise party before leaving? They gave me a lovely robe and satin mules. And all went down to the train with me. Well Mother Cat, I will write some more later. Love, Dorothy. X X*

*1928, Havana - Last night it cost me \$2.40 for dinner and I had only a little kind of a Spanish stew. So it is a good thing that we get \$8.00 a day to eat on.*

*1928, Havana - (to Mother) Well, that old Ware River news ought to be down here if they think I'm not working seven days a week and until 11 at night sometimes and often until 9:30 or 10. But it is worth it because you see a lot down here. I worked Sunday until 11 p.m. at night so Mother don't think you have to work hard at all.*

Her demonstrated abilities at the Cuban conference paved the way to a position in the American Consulate in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She couldn't tell her mother, but confided in her trusted Aunt Kathie:

*June 21, 1928, Havana - Now Kathie, I guess you think that I was not in earnest about going but now that you know I am, don't you think it is all right to go? You know what Mother will do, set up an awful howl, but Kathie if I were a boy I would be in the Navy long ago or something and she*



On board Southern Cross 1929

*would probably see me very seldom.*

Now Mom was on her way. Her tour with the American Consulate in Buenos Aires was her entry into a different world. She became close friends with her boss and his wife, and soon became fluent in Spanish.

*June 13, 1929, Buenos Aires - I am taking my lunches at an Argentine boarding house just to hear the language and you ought to see the things they give me to eat. Awful blood sausages and puchero, which is a native dish of cabbage and old meat and boiled potatoes and anything else they happen to think of.*

*September 5, 1929, Buenos Aires - Mother says she has been praying to St. Anthony for someone to send her money for coal and that it is \$16.75 a ton so Kathie, I can't be hardhearted enough to refuse her anything like coal when she isn't working hardly any, so the fifteenth of this month I will send you \$10 for the radio and \$17 for the coal.*

This was the beginning of the Great Depression and her mother was always asking for money to be sent back home to Ware. Mother could only complain to her Aunt Kathie:

*July 6, 1929, Buenos Aires - Mother says that although she would like a radio she needs two new dresses and isn't working much. Gee, Kathie, I don't think it is fair. She is only working about three days a week and yet she doesn't try to save a little by making over her old clothes. She has a whole shirtwaist boxful in the bedroom and a whole closetfull up stairs. ... When I went to high school I used to take the old petticoats she threw in the ragbag and dye them and make dresses and I am sure nobody showed me anything about sewing, I just did it because I had to.*

*Oct. 30, 1929, Buenos Aires - And every time I get a letter from Mother it makes me feel like I'm the most selfish girl in the world. What will I do? I guess I'll just have to give up any idea of ever getting married because I can't tell anybody that he will have to support my Mother too and I can't leave her without enough money, ... I get sick to my stomach when I stop to think of it, of her being all alone, and everything, but I'm alone too and in a strange country.*

*1929, Buenos Aires - They just say, Dottie's lucky. Well, maybe it is luck to study Spanish everyday and to work overtime every chance I get to show them that I want to make good.*

My sister Penny reminds us that throughout her life, "Mother didn't drive. Instead, she introduced us to the delight of public transportation."

*November 23, 1929, Buenos Aires - I just came back from a week's vacation. As we went by auto we didn't have to pay a cent for transportation and we traveled all together 1250 miles. Some trip. We traveled about 8 hours every day and didn't stay in the same hotel twice in order to keep within our schedule. And what roads! All full of six feet ruts and water up to your neck. We had to go across corn fields in order to*

*avoid the big holes in the roads, but it was all very interesting and we sure got a good idea of real Argentine country. Cordoba is the place where the only hills in the whole Republic are and they call them mountains but really they are no bigger than the hills around Ware.*

After a little over two years in Buenos Aires, her job assignment was changed to the American Consulate in Toyko. Getting there was not so easy. In Jan 1930 she headed out on the HamburgSouth America Line's "motorship" *Monte Cervantes*, however the ship sank in the treacherous Beagle Passage of the Straits of Magellan. All of the passengers were saved but the Captain went back to the ship for paperwork and his body was never found. If that wasn't enough, Dorothy came down with appendicitis:

*August 25, 1930 Buenos Aires - I'm feeling fine after the operation and can do anything but play tennis as that is too strenuous.*

Once Mom arrived in Japan, the Depression continued to take its toll, even far away in the Civil Service:

*May 7, 1931, Tokyo - We are up before the House for a 15% cut in salary but I think it won't hit me because it is for people making over \$2500 and I haven't had a raise for ages on account of the depression.*

When she did travel successfully to Tokyo, it was the next year on the S.S. *Grant*, a fine steamship. On board she met my father Allan:

*July 25, 1931, Tokyo - Dear Kathie: First I will tell you about the trip coming over. I met the nicest Lieutenant in the Navy. He has just come from teaching two years at Annapolis Naval Academy and will have three years duty in China. Well, we were together all during the trip and he sure is a peach. Very good looking and as nice as he is good looking. On board I had a great time because Allan of course knew all the naval officers and their wives and they invited me to all the little stateroom parties.*

*.... and I was asked to spend my vacation in Shangai by Allan. I have never known anyone as nice as he is and I'm not going to risk any chance of losing developing this friendship just because my insurance premiums are so high I won't have enough saved by the time summer comes.*

*P.S Don't tell Mother about the Lieutenant as she will put it in the news.*

She soon was employed at the new Embassy building in Tokyo:



Dorothy (ctr) & friends in Nikko, Japan, Feb 1933

*Sept. 1, 1931, Tokyo, Japan - (to see the new Embassy buildings) The grounds. . . are beautiful, with a rock garden and a darling swimming pool, and a reflecting pool where they are going to put all kinds of gold fishes and water lilies. There are millions of crickets singing in the trees. You know the crickets here sing almost like birds, or whip-poor-wills. The people sell them in tiny little wicker cages where they live for about two months on sugar and water.*

*Dec. 31, 1931, Tokyo - Oh yes, I got a Christmas telegram from the doctor who operated on me for appendicitis in B.A.*

Mother was actually engaged at the time she met Allan, however my father soon won her over and she broke the engagement. Allan and Dorothy saw much of each other in China and I have a photo of her with my father and a group of naval officers at the Chefoo Club:

*July 25, 1933 - Dollar Steamship Lines, on board*

*Well, I arrive in Tokyo today after a swell vacation. Everyone was so nice to me in Chefoo and invited Allan and I everywhere. I played tennis and swam every day. I came back by way of Shanghai to get a look at the place but it looks too much like Buenos Aires to be interesting.... This is a wonderful ship.*



Official State Dept passport photo: Dorothy Farrant

My father had his own adventures in life, but that is another story. My mother was unable to accept a position as secretary at the American Legation in Vienna because Allan and Dorothy married on April 24, 1934 at the Consulate in Tokyo. My mother paid the 100 yen (~5 cents) for the license.

And so it happened. A slow boat to China, two young Americans meet - and the rest, as they say, is genealogy - and my sisters, my brother, and me.

